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82/16119

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COMMENT ON ARTICLE BY MR WHITLAM

THE TRUTH ABOUT TIMOR (THE BULLETIN, MARCH 30, 1982)

This Paper prepared by:

FOREIGN AFFAIRS GROUP

Date:

16 April 1982

the Legislative Research Service of Parliament

FA1 82/16119

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Mr Whitlam's visit to East Timor lasted from Monday 1 March until the following Thursday, that is it lasted for a period of three days, not four, as has sometimes been carried by the press. The visit appears to have been sponsored by the Indonesian Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Ministry of Information. The CSIS is something of a think-tank, which facilitates contacts between the Indonesian establishment and foreign diplomats, academics, politicians, etc. In Indonesia, however, it is commonly regarded as an organisation closely linked with the Indonesian intelligence service, Bakin, and a group of generals close to the President, including General Ali Moertopo (a former intelligence chief, who is now Minister for Information), General Yoga Sugama head of Bakin and General Benny Murdhani, currently head of military intelligence. It is also interesting to note that the CSIS has played an important role in connection with East Timor since 1974. Its director, Harry Tjan, played a major role back in 1974 in the planning of "Operasi Komodo", the operation designed to bring about by subversive means the incorporation of East Timor. In 1974 and 75 Tjan made visits to North America and Western Europe in connection with the Timor campaign. These visits he repeated in the years following the invasion, in an effort to promote "understanding" of Indonesia's position on East Timor among certain academic institutions in North America and Western Europe, among them the prestigious Institute for Strategic Studies in London. Tjan was also apparently the author of the record of conversation with Peacock, which was fed to the National Times in 1978. In fact, Harry Tjan wrote this "record of conversation" long after the meetings took place, drafting it in such a manner as to embarrass Mr Peacock.

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In matters concerning East Timor it has been common for General Moertopo, CSIS, and the two intelligence agencies (military intelligence and Bakin) to work closely together. The decision to invite Mr Whitlam and Mr Hastings appears to have been part of a program launched at the end of last year with the aim of reducing and isolating opposition to Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor. It appears to have been based on the assumption that there had been a major decline in world interest in the Timor question and that a skilful diplomatic and disinformation campaign might succeed in getting the issue removed from the agenda of the United Nations, thereby winning international acceptance of the status quo in the former Portuguese colony.

Mr Whitlam makes much of the fact that he was accompanied by officials of the International Red Cross team (ICRC), who are said to have given Mr Hastings and the former Prime Minister a three hour briefing in Bali on Sunday 28 February. It should be borne in mind, however, that the ICRC officials are bound by very strict rules concerning political activities and the discussion of political aspects of the situations in which they happened to be involved. In fact, according to sources near the regional director, Mr Delapraz, the discussion concentrated on whether or not famine conditions continued to exist in East Timor. It is therefore highly unlikely that any of the political impressions or information gathered by Mr Whitlam would have come from ICRC sources, although officials of the mission are frequently referred to in his article. Indeed, it would seem that Mr Whitlam's article (and probably also the article of Peter Hastings) could bring some embarrassment to ICRC officials, who are ever careful to distance themselves from anything political in the situations in which they are involved.

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The US Catholic Relief Services is an organisation very different from the ICRC. For some years the CRS has been identified in the United States as a staunch supporter of the Suharto regime. Indeed, in a discussion about the human rights situation in Timor in 1980, a CRS official declared that his mission in East Timor was "going where the government of Indonesia wants it to go and doing what the government of Indonesia wants it to do". No political questions were asked. The assessment by this source of the situation in the former Portuguese colony was that "East Timor relies on the Russians, it is being said around here, and it is enough to influence judgements around here". Indeed, it was subsequently revealed by a senior CRS official that no more than 20 per cent of the organisation's aid to Timor was being distributed by the Church, the rest of it being channelled through the Indonesian military infrastructure. The information conveyed to Mr Whitlam by the CRS officials needs to be considered against this background. In this context it also needs to be borne in mind that the CRS in its various statements before US Congressional Committees, and elsewhere, has been careful not to impute any guilt to the Suharto regime. Furthermore, CRS officials had never been to East Timor before 1979, and were therefore unfamiliar with what conditions were like prior to the Indonesian invasion.

In short, these two "sources" to which Mr Whitlam frequently refers are difficult to assess. One, the ICRC, does not make statements of a political character while the other, the CRS, has for some years defended Indonesia's seizure of East Timor.

Let us now turn to Mr Whitlam's conclusions and comments. At the beginning of his article he boldly claims:

> "The conditions of the people of East Timor are much better than before the civil war of 1975 and the famine of 1978. The Indonesian authorities, with the advice of international bodies, have committed themselves to thorough development programmes for the province".

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That present conditions in the former colony are better than before the famine of 1978, can hardly be questioned since, conditions were at that time, according to one I.C.R.C. official, comparable, with the worst of the Kampuchea crisis. But how can Mr Whitlam speak of what Timor was like before the civil war of 1975?. He was not in East Timor at that time, and nor were any of the I.C.R.C. Officials who accompanied him. In support of this contention Mr Whitlam goes on to say that

> "throughout East Timor there are new schools, including secondary schools, new and reconstructed hospitals and dispensaries, new houses and community facilities".

In fact, the Indonesians had given some attention to education, no doubt with the hope of winning over the younger generation of Timorese but one might question whether all the schools and hospitals Mr Whitlam saw are really new. According to a number of Timorese (and not Church sources) in several centres the Indonesians have repainted some of the buildings that were constructed by the Portuguese in the last years of their rule and have depicted them as having been built with assistance from Indonesia. Also, many of the new houses are said to be for Indonesian soldiers and officials, and not for the Timorese.

Mr Whitlam also speaks of asphalt roads being extended. This progress was underway in Portuguese times, and, in any case, the Indonesians seem to be concentrating on roads of military importance, such as the road between Dili and Ermera. Ermera is not only an important administrative centre; it is the centre of the coffee industry which has been a lucrative source of funds to a group of senior Indonesian military officers. Mr Whitlam spoke of a new irrigation system at Maliana, near the Indonesian border, but it is noteworthy that Maliana already had a irrigation system before Indonesia intervened in East Timor. In fact when the Portuguese left East Timor there were some 20

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tractors at Maliana. Another example of development, according to Mr Whitlam, was the existence, "for the first time" of some broadcast and publication in Tetum, the lingua franca of East Timor. This is simply not true. There were regular broadcasts in Tetum over the government-controlled radio Dili in the early 70s, and long before the Indonesians intervened in the affairs of the Territory, publication in Tetum was well under way.

A large part of Mr Whitlam's article is aimed at discrediting reports that famine conditions were present in East Timor. Mr Whitlam clearly seeks to discredit Monsignor da Costa Lopes, whom he sees as the author of the reports of famine, and other difficulties in East Timor. But, according to the letter Lopes wrote to an Australian Bishop, the Administrator merely made it clear that famine conditions would occur at some time in the future if additional food stocks were not sent to the Territory. Moreover, neither Mr Whitlam nor the ICR team appear to have visited those parts of East Timor which are most prone to food shortages. Mr Whitlam went to centres like Maliana, Suai and Los Palos, which are among the best food-producing areas of the province. But, in any case, Mr Whitlam and Mr Hastings were visiting East Timor towards the end of the wet season, when, in Portuguese times, famine conditions were never present in any part of the Territory. It is between August and November, that is the end of the dry season, that food tends to become scarce in certain parts, particularly in the mountain regions (which Mr Whitlam did not visit).

Mr Whitlam frequently quotes the ICR as denying that famine conditions existed, but an ICR official in Jakarta who was subsequently contacted, declared pointedly that he was merely prepared to say that no famine conditions appear to have been present in those places visited in East Timor, when such visits took place.

Mr Whitlam goes on to suggest that adverse stories about East Timor generally come from "church sources". He claims that such stories have been circulated because the Portuguese - educated clergy "resent and lament the departure" of the former colonial power. He appears to have concluded that these stories are fabrications reflecting the distress of a large section of the clergy at the decline in Portuguese customs, language, and tradition.

These arguments make little sense. In the first place accounts about adverse conditions in East Timor, from the Church sources of the province, have many times been corroborated by letters from individual Timorese, and in the testimony of those who have managed to leave the country for Australia or Portugal. Not least, much of the information about conditions in East Timor has come from Indonesian sources, especially from sources from within the Indonesian Catholic Church. It is not accurate to suggest that the Timorese clergy were opposed in principle to a change from the Portuguese system. In fact on the eve of Indonesia's military intervention, it was the conservative element of the Portuguese clergy who were less averse to the idea of an anti-communist Indonesian regime moving into the Territory and dislodging the feared left-wing Fretilin. Although Fretilin was not a communist party, the conservative clergy regarded them as moving in that direction. The previous Bishop, Bishop Ribeiro, was one of those who at first was not strongly opposed to the idea of an Indonesian takeover. Thus, he was later to declare that when the Indonesian paratroops appeared, to him they seemed like angels, but once they landed they behaved liked devils. In 1976 Bishop Ribeiro was to write to President Suharto stating that although he had disliked Fretilin for their "communistic" activities, the Indonesian troops with their killing, raping, and their looting were one thousand times worse".

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It is important to bear in mind that Monsignor Lopes and most other Timorese priests were faced with the enormous task of trying to heal the terrible psychological wounds inflicted on the people by the Indonesian invaders, in the first three or four years after the invasion. By and large, the clergy sought to maintain a position of political neutrality, but they too suffered at the hands of the Indonesians. However, it cannot be said that the church has falsified or exaggerated reports about the situation in Timor, because in so many cases the few accounts that have emerged from this source have been credibly corroborated by similar accounts from other quarters.

It is important to note that for some time the Indonesian authorities have been anxious to discredit and remove the acting Bishop (as he is sometimes called), because of his "uncooperative" attitude, and because they are intent on placing the Catholic Church in East Timor under the authority of the Indonesian hierarchy in Jakarta, in order to round off the formalities of integration. At present, the Apostolic Administrator is answerable directly to the Vatican. The accounts from Mr Whitlam and Mr Hastings might well provide the Indonesians with a stronger case for dismissing Lopes. Already there are reports from Jakarta that they hope to get rid of him by the end of this year and to replace him with an Indonesian Bishop. His departure would, however, be a great loss to the Timorese.

Much of the remainder of Mr Whitlam's letter is an attack on the Australian council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA). There is practically nothing in his article about the way the Timorese feel, nor about their general living conditions. Even if there is no longer any famine in East Timor, that itself hardly makes for a happy, politically-contented society. Mr Whitlam does not mention anywhere the denial of the basic human right of self determination to the Timorese, nor the fact that

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the events since Indonesia's invasion of East Timor have cost the lives of tens of thousands of people. Even supporters of Indonesia generally admit that the loss is not below 50,000 and as only 1,500 or so died during the one month civil war, the rest of these lives were lost after the Indonesian invasion, their deaths, in whatever circumstances, being directly or indirectly attributable to Indonesia's forced incorporation of the Territory. Reports from many other Timorese sources, most of them nothing to do with the church, insist that the Timorese continue to be bitterly opposed to the Indonesian presence and to the concept of integration. The provision of food and medical supplies as emergency relief, which is the role the ICRC is virtually confined to, is only one small part of East Timor's human rights problem. It must be remembered that the ICRC operations are largely confined to those problems of a "band-aid" character, but, in this case, the blatantly illegal seizure of East Timor and the brutal subjugation of its people are issues basic to any serious consideration of the important human rights aspect of the problem.

Mr Whitlam refers to the Traill Report in his attack On ACFOA. However, the Traill Report is very limited in scope and biased in its approach. What Mr Whitlam does not mention is that one of the Commissioners, Miss Joyce Shewcroft, refused to sign it. The views of the other other two commissioners were evidently swayed by the totally erronious assumption that Fretilin posed a Communist threat to Indonesia, and that Indonesia, in resorting to force to annex East Timor was understandable, if not justifiable. In essence, their recommendations were that Australia should have gone along with Indonesia in relation to integration, in order to create the kind of channel of goodwill that would have facilitated the sending of aid to the Timorese. But, once again, the fundamental human rights question about the right to self-determination is thus virtually ignored.

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